

BIDWELL MANSION
(Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park)
525 Esplanade
Chico
Butte County
California

HALS CA-63
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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- Location: 525 Esplanade, Chico, Butte County, California, 95926. (530) 895-6144
Lat: 39.73236 Long: -121.84352 (Center of the Mansion, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84).
- Significance: The Bidwell Mansion is significant because of its association of John and Annie Bidwell. John Bidwell was part of the first wagon trains that arrived in California, he discovered gold in 1848, laid out the town of Chico, served in the House of Representatives, lobbied for California statehood, and ran for President of the United States in 1892. Annie Ellicott Kennedy Bidwell was the daughter of Joseph C.G. Kennedy, Superintendent of the U.S. Census and was an advocate for prohibition and the suffragette movement.
- Description: The structure of the property surrounding the mansion retains many features as depicted in a circa 1877 sketch by Smith and Elliott. The most significant landscape feature is a large oval-shaped planting bed, as wide as the width of the house, northeast of the main entry to the home. The bed is surrounded by an oval drive that passes beneath the porte-cochere at the front door. A southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) 25 – 35 feet taller than the three story tower of the house – one of the original Bidwell plantings, is planted in the oval. Other, smaller trees and shrubs seen in historic photos are no longer present.
- Other original trees that remain are a maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*), a spectacular – in size and form - tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), a South American monkey puzzle (*Araucaria imbricata*) and a Lawson cypress (*Cupressus lawsoniana*). These trees are planted within a broad expanse of lawn between the mansion and Esplanade – typical of Victorian era gardens intended to demonstrate the owner's wealth and taste. More recent generations of tree plantings are found surrounding the mansion. A portion of the front yard has had trees removed and a variety of new saplings have been planted to replace them.
- A lushly planted area south of the mansion, along the Big Chico Creek, remains today though the trees are much larger than those in the Smith and Elliott sketch. Also the location of the main road – now called Esplanade appears to be in the same location as shown in the sketch.
- In the sketch the planting beds south of the mansion are shown as lawn without foundation plantings. Currently, this area has been recently planted with foundation shrubs. There is also a row of three camellias (*Camellia japonica*) on this side about twenty feet high, so these are quite old and may date to the Bidwell era. A historic photo of this side of the house shows a delicate, ornamental iron arbor covered in

vines. Today, it has been replaced with a heavy, timber structure planted with wisteria (*Wisteria chinensis*). Historic photos depict a lushly planted garden with hedges, shrubs and vines climbing up onto the house. Currently, most shrubs and all but the wisteria have been removed. Planting beds are top-dressed with a thick layer of wood chips.

In 1877 the area north of the mansion was planted in orchards and vineyards. Today, this area has been developed as housing and commercial areas.

History: John Bidwell was born in 1819 in New York State. In 1841, at the age of 22, he was one of the first pioneers to cross the Sierra Nevada in route to California. When he first arrived he served as the business manager for John Sutter and personally transported the first gold discovered in California to San Francisco to be assayed.

Shortly thereafter in 1848 Bidwell made his own gold discovery near the middle fork of the Feather River. He used his new found wealth to purchase the 26,000 acre Rancho del Arroyo Chico and began developing the agriculture of the region. At one point the Rancho was the most famous and highly diversified agricultural enterprise in California. In 1860 Bidwell laid out the town of Chico.

In 1865 he hired San Francisco architect Henry W. Cleveland to design his 10,000 square foot, 26-room Italian villa. In April of 1868 he convinced Annie Ellicott Kennedy to marry him and shortly thereafter they moved into the mansion.

The Bidwells remained in the mansion until their deaths in 1900 (John) and 1918 (Annie) at which time Annie Bidwell gave the mansion and grounds to the Presbyterian Church to serve as a school. Then in 1923 the site was acquired by the State College, and finally it was purchased by California State Parks and designated as a State Historic Park. The property is California Registered Historic Landmark No. 329, 1966 and was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972.

Sources: Site Visit on 26 April 2011.

“Bidwell Mansion Gracious Living in the 19th Century”, by Lois McDonald, Ellen Clark, Judy Chiapella and Shirley Kendall, Creative Publishing, Lawrenceburg, IN.

Bidwell Mansion State Historic Park brochure and website, www.parks.ca.gov. P.O. Box 942896, Sacramento, CA 94296 (800) 777-0369.

Bidwell Mansion Association literature, P.O. Box 1303, Chico CA 95927 (530) 895-6144.

Historian: Chris Pattillo, Historic Landscape Architect, PGAdesign
444 17th Street, Oakland, CA, 94612, pattillo@PGAdesign.com
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Front of house with porte-cochere and oval planter with southern magnolia. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



View of the southern magnolia from the front door. Fir to the left and the tulip tree to the right. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



Tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) on the Bidwell Mansion grounds (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).



View of the west side of the house with foundation shrubs and the southern magnolia in the background. Esplanade Avenue is in the background. (Chris Pattillo, April 26, 2011).